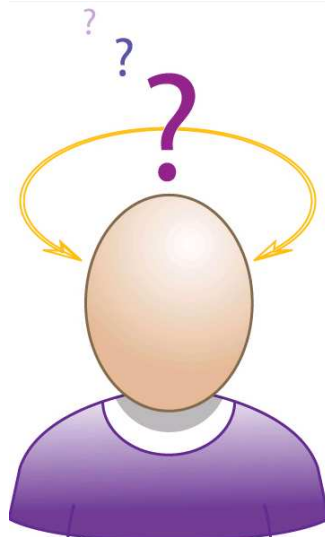CEEBL

'Centre for Excellence in Enquiry Based Learning'

Online Group-Work Guidelines

By Kate Jones

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Online Group-Work Guidelines

Why Have Online Modules?

The stereotypical view of a lecture-based university education is becoming a thing of the past with many universities adopting a more student-led approach to teaching. Such change is welcomed by students as it offers newfound control of your learning without the classroom constraints of traditional methods of teaching. By allowing a greater level of student control over higher education experiences universities are providing you with invaluable opportunities to develop transferable life skills that are essential for any future career.   Online modules are a great vehicle which universities can use to integrate this new philosophy of tutoring. They give you, the student, the opportunity to enhance your learning using a university organised facility to suit your timetable. Universities avoid the problems of booking lecture theatres and you get the opportunity to fit your education around your life (so you don't have to fit your life around your education!). Not to mention they offer a new and exciting way to study that doesn't involve falling asleep in a lecture theatre!

About This Guide

Here is a short guide on how to deal with these modules and some of the challenges that they bring. In the guidelines you will find:

- A 'top tips' section: This provides some valuable advice collected from students who have had the online experience already.

- A frequently asked questions section: This hopes to answer the initial queries that you will have regarding online communication so that you will have the opportunity to jump straight in with your module.

I hope you find this useful and that you enjoy the online –communication aspect of your module. Remember that by allowing you to learn in this revolutionary way the university is giving you the opportunity to broaden your horizons and develop transferable skills that will be desired by any future employee.

Top Tips for Online Group Work

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Communication online can be difficult as many barriers are present that do not exist with traditional face to face communication, here are some top-tips to make the transition easier.

✱ **Write coherently in good English**

This is important as it is professional and helps to avoid any language barriers which may be present within your group.

This means:

- DO NOT use abusive or offensive language

- Avoid `text talk' on discussion boards as this may be easily misunderstood

- No use of `slang'

- Use good sentence structure – take the time to form sentences and questions well to ensure that you are well understood

- Appreciate that it may be necessary to add more explanation in an online setting to ensure that your point is coherent

✴ Treat all group members with respect

This helps to maintain a good team dynamic and will encourage them to treat you in the same way. This will also encourage the sharing of ideas freely within the group as members will feel more comfortable expressing themselves.

Therefore:

- Give / receive constructive criticism where appropriate

- ONLY give constructive criticism!

- Show support to group members ideas as this will encourage them to contribute more

- Show your group that you value their opinion – ask for their views on your ideas, as well as encouraging their participation. This may also extend your train of thought beyond that which could have been achieved alone

✴ Encourage a good group dynamic

This helps you get to know your group which will make it easier to work with them and to get your point of view across without causing offence.

For Example

- Encourage communication (within and outside the module)

- Post an introductory post where you introduce yourself on a more social relaxed level (optional but recommended) – you don't have to get too personal so don't panic!

- Get to know the strengths of your group members- this will allow you to allocate tasks appropriately. This means that the tasks will be done well and the group will feel comfortable that they can be competently completed

- Possibly agree to a set of group guidelines that you should all stick too - again this is optional but it is highly recommended as it helps everyone to understand what is expected of them.

- Make the most of the introductory session – many online modules have face to face introduction and even if this does not happen with yours there is always valuable time allocated to bond as a group...so use it well!

∗ Be organised

This prevents any unnecessary stress as everyone knows what they have to do and when it should be completed.

This means:

- Stick to deadlines -This may be deadlines set by the group or deadlines set by the module leader but if you agree to do something….DO IT. Setting personal group deadlines can often be a good way of ensuring that the final module deadlines are met (set group deadlines a few days before the module deadline to ensure that you can comfortably complete all work)

- Ensure that you contribute regularly as this will help you keep on top of what is being discussed and make it easy for you to stay involved

- Try to stay on topic whilst on discussion boards

- Organise a team structure – this may be dynamic (e.g. change every week) or fixed depending on the individual group

- Compete any minutes promptly so that all group members are able to keep track of meetings/discussions even if they were not involved personally

Be Honest

This is essential in maintaining group trust to encourage a good group dynamic within which ideas can be shared freely. It is important to be honest with your team members (e.g. when they ask your opinion) as they will then value and trust your opinion.

For example

- If you feel like you cannot complete a task, say so with plenty of time for your group to re-evaluate. If you don't then you may not be able to complete the task in time and your group will suffer. This will affect team dynamics and may even affect your mark

- Contribute equally and be honest about the time that you have spent on allocated tasks. This will mean that team members will appreciate what you do and will be more willing to help with your workload as they believe that you are as willing as they are to put in the necessary hours

- Don't be afraid to give advice to team members as this could improve the overall task outcome. It is important to challenge ideas in the process of developing them and this is a key aspect of team working

- Complete a full and truthful bibliography (if appropriate to the task)– it is essential to do this to avoid plagiarism and it looks more professional to include your sources rather than take credit yourself
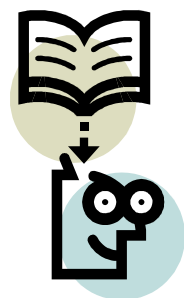
Be Proactive and Professional

This is essential in completing tasks successfully to an acceptable level and helps you to develop transferrable skills that are essential for any future career, therefore a professional attitude helps you to get the most out of your learning experience

For example

- Ask the facilitator and / or group members if you don't understand something – asking for clarification is nothing to be ashamed of and helps you to complete tasks effectively

- It is professional to log on for short periods frequently to ensure that discussions progress and that ideas are developed

- Report any issues to your facilitator or team leader as it is essential that any problems such as this are dealt with quickly so the team is not effected

- Discuss the themes which come up on the discussion board, ask questions and challenge opinions in a polite and professional manner as this helps to get the best out of your team

- Start new discussions with a new discussion thread and title as this makes it easier when you have to refer back to discussions

- Do not just `cut and paste' information to discussion boards, discuss the issues which arise as this is a more valuable exercise which you will learn more from (and also much more interesting to do!)

- Avoid plagiarism – reference properly

Approach tasks effectively

Simplify each task before beginning it and review progress at appropriate times as this will mean that progress is constantly monitored and future task plans are evaluated on a regular basis. This helps to ensure their relevance and encourages the teams to move through tasks at a controlled pace.

This means:

- You can allocate tasks correctly to the team member who is most capable and ensure that the work load is spread evenly

- It ensures that everyone has a good understanding of each task and their role in completing them

- Checking progress at regular intervals can keep the group focussed on the task and remind people of what they have to do

- Review team members work as this gives you the opportunity to ensure that tasks have been completed satisfactorily as well as providing an opportunity to thank and praise your group for their contributions

Keep in contact with your group

Ensure that, where possible, you have exchanged contact information with your group; this may be email addresses or contact phone numbers.

This will mean:

- That you will be able to arrange meetings (online or face to face) quickly if you need to

- That you, as a team, can chase up unresponsive team members without the need for additional help from facilitators or module leaders

- It may also be useful to exchange your timetables so that if a face to face or online meeting needs to be called you can find a time when it would be most convenient (online timetable including meeting planners are available and may help here)

Frequently Asked Questions

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Here are some commonly asked questions which will hopefully provide further insight into the world of online communication. These questions should give you some idea of how you would combat foreseen problems in online group work situations.

1. What do I do if a group member is not participating in discussions?

Do not jump to conclusions. The person concerned may have a very valid reason for not contributing. You can deal with this via a three step process:

- Firstly, try addressing a question to them directly in the discussion board (maybe ask their opinion on something); it may be that they are uncertain of blogging or are nervous about doing it initially.

- If they still do not participate then the designated chair could send them an email asking them if everything is OK.

- If after this they have still not provided a satisfactory reason or began participating then a facilitator should be notified.

2. What sort of things do I write on the blog?

Any related ideas are relevant; don't be afraid of posting anything that you feel is important! But remember that it is best to keep your blogs short and to the point as this makes for easier reading for your team members.

An introductory post is useful just to get used to the set up, it may also be useful to comment on other peoples introductory posts to practise this (for example you could all try to find something in common and comment on other peoples interests). Do not use negative comments when blogging: by all means criticise but ensure that you are constructive (remember online communication is very different to face to face so you have to be careful not to cause offence).

It may be useful for the group leader to initially blog up the tasks and to take each project from there, this helps to focus the team into making relevant contributions.

3. What do I do if the designated group leader does not facilitate well or contribute enough?

It may sometimes happen that the initial group leader/chair does not lead the group well or does not provide adequate facilitation of the group. This presents a difficult situation as you do not want to offend someone by totally taking over their role but a group needs to be facilitated. If you are a group member of a group where this occurs you can present ideas to the group and follow them up with a direct address of the chair....'what does the chair think?' This may encourage them to be more proactive in their role but if this does not occur, this technique gives you the opportunity to guide the group without jumping into the role of chair.

4. How do I deal with someone who is being unnecessarily critical?

As it is an online module take care not to be too sensitive as this type of communication can be difficult and can often lead to misinterpretation.

If a group member has been unnecessarily critical you could take it upon yourself to ask them why e.g. *'why did you not like the idea so much?'* or ask them to come up with a suitable alternative.

If the criticism is of another group member's ideas it may be worth stepping in and picking out a positive aspect of the idea to contradict the criticism

> e.g. *'It seems that people don't agree with using those bright graphics for the leaflet, I do however think that we need some form of colour to brighten it up...what does everyone else think?'*

5. How do I give criticism without causing offence?

A good way to constructively criticise is to give advice on improvements. It is always important to praise a group member for their input as they may have spent more time and effort than you realise generating their idea.

A useful method is a 'praise sandwich' where you praise someone, then criticise, then praise again

> e.g. *'I really like what you have done with the title page, I just have one suggestion.......thank you for your work on it'.*

Another key point is to end on a positive note, for example, thanking the group or giving them encouragement.

6. What do I do if I feel like I cannot compete a task?

Always be honest! If you feel like you cannot complete a task then you should let your group know as soon as possible so that they can make other arrangements. Your group may be able to give you advice on your task or someone may be willing to take on your task.

If you feel uncomfortable telling your whole group then you could target the chair or your facilitator.

7. What do I do if I do not understand a task or what someone has posted?

Don't be afraid to ask for clarification, you can ask them to rephrase or to elaborate. It may be helpful here to refer back to the initial objective as you will then get an explanation that fits the task.

Referring to the initial objective may also mean that you question the relevance of certain information which will in turn help to refocus the group and keep the team on target to meet the real objectives.

8. How do we designate group roles?

This is entirely up to the group itself, each group is different as it is individuals that create the team dynamic as a whole so this designation of roles must be a team decision in order for the chosen roles to best fit the groups.

You may want fixed group roles (i.e. one person takes on a set role for the entire semester), you may want to share the roles amongst the group (i.e. different team members chair different tasks) or you may want to let your group develop naturally.

It can be helpful to outline the specific tasks that will be undertaken by each team member in specific roles. If this is written down then it can be a useful tool if someone is not pulling their weight as you can kindly refer back to them! These can be most effective if they are included in with some group rules that all team members agree on prior to the completion of the set tasks:

> e.g. *: 'we agree that the chair will post up an introduction to new tasks which will explain what needs to be done by each team member and any deadlines'*

9. Is there any way we can ensure that our team well organised?

This can be done by allocating one team member as the team's organiser (this role could be conducted by the chair or you may want a specific role for organisation which would leave the chair to delegate). In this role they remind people of deadlines and ensure that everyone knows exactly what they should be doing.

Alternatively, you can set up a group timetable so that everyone knows exactly what they are supposed to do.

Another good idea is to create your own timetable aside from the set timeline to ensure that you have left room for contingencies and have planned for the unpredictable.

10.   How do we write minutes and what are they for?

Minutes are simply a summary of what was discussed at a meeting. As these guidelines are designed to complement an online module all 'meetings' will be online and can be accessed by the individual who is writing them up as well as the rest of the team.

Pick out any key points that were made, note who made them, if appropriate, and give a general consensus on the ideas that were generated.

In an online setting it is useful to complete minutes regularly as their production leads to easy to read summaries of long discussions which makes following the discussions much easier for fellow group members or facilitators.

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About the Author

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Kate is a Pharmacy student and started working for CEEBL in 2008 as an intern for the Medical and Human Science Faculty after thoroughly enjoying her experience of an EBL module within her degree. The debates centring around students as consumers or collaborators in their education was a current issue whilst Kate was an intern and the provision of resources for student led learning is something that she has taken a particular interest in. She had the unique opportunity to work as an intern and a student on an online Inter-Professional Education module and used this opportunity to produce these guidelines. Kate hopes to merge the EBL ethos into her future career in the field of pharmacy.

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Acknowledgements

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I would like to thank everyone who has helped me to produce these guidelines, including: Louise Goldring, Kim Comer, Nicola Turner, Adele Aubrey, the CEEBL team and all of the students of the IPE module who provided feedback and interesting thoughts which allowed me to build the guidelines.

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